

# PUTIN VOWS TO HUNT REBELS WHO 'BETRAYED MOTHERLAND'

MARC BENNETTS – BRUNO WATERFIELD – GEORGE GRYLLES

Vladimir Putin has sought to reassure Russians that the danger of civil war is over and that the Kremlin is back in control, after heavily armed fighters led by maverick tycoon Yevgeny Prigozhin marched within 190km of Moscow.

In an address to the nation on Tuesday morning Australian time, the Russian President vowed that the organisers of the rebellion would be brought to justice but said that “patriot” Wagner Group fighters would be welcome to go home to their families, join the regular army or move to Belarus.

He thanked the mercenary group for avoiding “bloodshed” and made no mention of the dozen or so Russian soldiers that were killed by Wagner during its rebellion at the weekend.

Russia had been saved, he claimed, by the “patriotic spirit” of its people.

However, just before Mr Putin’s attempt to inspire a feeling of stability after the most serious blow to his two-decade rule, Mr Prigozhin issued his own defiant audio message.

Mr Prigozhin, who was once a close ally of Mr Putin, said Wagner’s “march of justice” with 25,000 fighters from Ukraine into Russia had been prompted by an air attack from the Russian military that had killed dozens of his fighters in eastern Ukraine.

He admitted that his fighters had shot down Russian aircraft, but that they had no choice. “They were dropping bombs on us and launching missile strikes,” he said, claiming that no Russian soldiers had been killed on the ground as his mercenaries advanced on Moscow.

Mr Prigozhin also boasted that Wagner’s unprecedented uprising was a “masterclass” in military professionalism that had put the Russian army to shame. He denied that Wagner’s actions were a coup attempt, saying: “It was not our aim to topple the current regime.”

He did not provide any details about his whereabouts or his plans but said that Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko, who brokered the deal with the Kremlin that halted the rebellion, had agreed to help Wagner to

operate legally. There were reports that Mr Prigozhin had been seen at a hotel in Minsk, the Belarusian capital.

“The aim of the march was to prevent the destruction of Wagner and hold to account officials who through their unprofessional actions have committed a massive number of errors,” he said.

“Society demanded it.”

Mr Prigozhin had demanded the dismissal of Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov before his revolt. There is now growing speculation that Mr Shoigu may be replaced by Alexei Dyumin, a former defence official who was once Mr Putin’s personal bodyguard.

Mr Putin accused Mr Prigozhin in his address of betraying Russia, but did not mention his name. He promised that any of the rebels who wanted to live in Belarus would be allowed to, indicating that he would honour the peace deal.

However, Mr Putin also said that the investigation into the mutiny had not been closed and that its leaders would have to stand to account for their betrayal of the “Motherland”.

He said that any attempt at “blackmail” was “doomed to fail” and blamed the West for inciting the failed uprising.

The US State Department said that the situation in Russia remained “dynamic” and that the American ambassador had contacted Russian officials on Saturday and made clear that Washington had had no hand in the rebellion.

“This is an internal Russian affair in which the United States is not involved and will not be involved,” a spokesman said.

Channel One, Russia’s main television station, led one of its evening bulletins with a report on an alleged plan by the “regime” in Kyiv to hand over holy Orthodox Christian relics to Western countries.

The EU’s foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, said Mr Putin had been a victim of his own malevolent creation in allowing Mr Prigozhin to build up his own army and media empire. “The monster that Putin created with Wagner, the monster is biting him now; the monster is acting against his creator,” Mr Borrell said in Luxembourg.

Andrei Kartapolov, a Russian parliamentarian and former army officer, suggested there was no reason to disband Wagner. The mercenaries “did not do anything reprehensible” and were simply “following orders” from Mr Prigozhin. “Why ban it?” he asked.

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